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ABSTRACT

The summary of research in this brief is, for the most part, guided by the work of M. Chesney-Lind and her associates. Overall, the brief reviews the extent of girls' delinquency and violence, the ways they differ from boys, the contributing factors, and effective program strategies to prevent female delinquency. In 1994, arrests of girls accounted for one-fourth of youth arrests. Although there has been an increase in the arrest rate of girls for violent offenses, this pattern parallels an increase for boys' arrests, and may simply reflect overall changes in youth behavior. When girls do commit violent crimes, they are more likely to use knives than guns, and are more likely to murder someone as a result of conflict than as a consequence of crime. School-related violence by girls, although not inconsequential, is far less likely than violence in school by boys. Abuse and victimization and school failure have been noted as risk factors for girls' violence and aggression. Female gangs make up a relatively small percentage of gangs nationwide, but it has been estimated that girls account for one-third of the youth in gangs in Los Angeles, California. Programs that serve young violent women effectively must take into account girls' status in a gendered society. Unfortunately, the record for funding girl-focused programs or those with components that address delinquent girls' unique needs has not been good. An evaluation of the few existing programs that have been shown to be effective with young women suggests that counseling, educational and occupational support and skill-building, and access to caring adults are important components. (Contains 22 references.) (SLD)

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AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

1999

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AN OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH ON GIRLS AND VIOLENCE

Introduction

Youth violence, and particularly violence carried out by girls, has been the subject of intense media attention recently, with an ever-increasing number of girls portrayed as carrying guns in their mouths and participating in violent crime. Although the percentage of girls' involvement in delinquency and crime has increased in the last two decades, it is still far below the level of boys' involvement, and it differs quite significantly.

There is a paucity of literature on girls' violence, as most research on youth violence does not distinguish between girls and boys. The most comprehensive and extensive literature reviews on young women's crime and delinquency have been conducted by Meda Chesney-Lind and her associates. While not focusing exclusively on violent girls, their work on girls in trouble with the law provides much insight into the complex issue of girls' aggression and violence. The summary of research in this brief is, for the most part, guided by their work. Overall, the brief reviews the extent of girls' delinquency and violence, the ways they differ from boys', the contributing factors, and effective program strategies to prevent female delinquency.

The Scope of Girls' Delinquency, Crime, and Violence

The Extent of Girls' Involvement

An understanding of the extent of girls' delinquency can be gleaned from statistics, as compiled by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and other official agencies, and from self-report surveys conducted with young people. These data demonstrate that girls are far less likely than boys to be arrested; in 1994, for example, girls accounted for one-fourth of youthful arrests (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999). However, by all accounts, girls *appear* to be involved in substantially more violent crime than they were a decade ago. Based on an analysis of FBI statistics, arrests of girls for murder were up 64 percent; robbery arrests, 114 percent; aggravated assault, 137 percent; and other assaults, 126 percent (Chesney-Lind & Brown, 1999).

There are a number of reasons why these figures need to be interpreted cautiously. First, there has been a parallel increase in boys' arrest rate for violent offenses since 1985. Chesney-Lind and Brown assert, "this pattern, then, reflects overall changes in youth behavior, rather than dramatic changes and shifts in the character of girls' behavior" (1999, p. 176). In addition, boys are far more likely than girls to be arrested for violent crimes (homicide, forcible rape, aggravated assault) and serious property offenses (burglary, arson). Girls account for a very small percentage of violent crime, and violent crime by girls is a small percentage of all girls' delinquency, and it has remained essentially unchanged since the mid-1980s. Only 2.1 percent of girls' arrests in 1985 were for serious crimes of violence; the figure climbed only slightly, to 3.4 percent, by 1994. Thus, large increases in girls' violent crime rate translate into only small increases in the number of crimes committed.

Another explanation for the increase in girls' violent offenses is a redefinition of what constitutes a violent offense. For example, a review of 2,000 cases of young women referred to the Maryland juvenile justice system for "person-to-person" offenses revealed that almost all involved assault (Mayer, 1994). A closer look at the cases showed that approximately one-half were incidents with family members such as "a girl hitting her mother and her mother subsequently pressing charges," thus criminalizing the girls' action. In the past, such aggression might have been dealt with informally, or the girl may have been charged with a less serious status offense ("a person in need of supervision"). More recently, a girl who hits a family member or acquaintance (often while defending herself or attempting to leave) is charged with battery or assault, is placed in the juvenile justice system, and often goes to prison. Several researchers have found this practice, sometimes referred to as "bootstrapping," especially prevalent in the delinquency of African American girls (Bartollas, 1993).

Other factors that may account for the large increases in assault charges for girls are more stringent law enforcement, including "zero tolerance" school policies which bring police onto school grounds more readily, and the arrest of girls who skirmish with other girls (Chesney-Lind, personal communication, February 1999).

The Nature of Girls' Crime

When girls do commit violent crimes, they differ significantly from boys'. For example, girls are more likely to use knives than guns and to murder someone as a result of conflict rather than during a crime. Girls are also more likely than boys to murder family members.

Self-report data also show that boys are far more likely to commit aggressive acts than girls. One recent study on self-reported aggression showed that about a third of girls, as compared with half the boys, had been in a physical fight in the last year. Girls were far more likely to fight with a parent or sibling, while boys were more likely to fight with friends or strangers. Boys were also two to three times more likely to report carrying a weapon in the past month (Girls Incorporated, 1996).

Despite the aforementioned "bootstrapping" of offenses, girls, when arrested, are still much more likely to be arrested for status offenses, such as running away, prostitution, or curfew violations, than for violent offenses. Chesney-Lind and Shelden

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(1998) suggest that girls are arrested disproportionately more than boys for status offenses (28 percent versus 11 percent) because of a tendency to sexualize their offenses and an attempt to control their behavior. Thus, while crime and delinquency among youth have risen overall since the 1970s, the character of juvenile arrests has not changed.

Girls' Participation in School-Related Violence

Most aggressive acts in schools, such as physical fighting, bullying, and weapon possession, are carried out by males and aimed at males, although females also engage in similar aggressive acts. Indeed, student-on-student assault is the most common form of school violence reported. According to a recent national study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one-half of boys and one-quarter of girls reported being physically assaulted by someone in their school (Hamburg, 1998). Tolan and Guerra (1994) reported that almost one-half of urban school children have witnessed someone being beaten or attacked in the preceding year. In a recent CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 18 percent of boys and 5 percent of girls reported carrying a weapon to school (Flannery, 1998).

While boys' rates of aggressive incidents in school are higher than girls', girls' rates are not inconsequential. For example, in schools characterized by large numbers of boys carrying weapons, there is a correspondingly high rate of girls who also carry weapons. Webster, Gainer, and Champion (1993) found that in school settings where high numbers of boys carry guns (40 percent), a high percentage of girls (67 percent) carry knives.

Psychosocial Theories of Girls' Delinquency and Crime

Relatively little attention has been paid to female experiences with crime and delinquency because it has been generally associated with boys. In fact, most early researchers viewed delinquency and gang activity as strictly male pursuits; when females were discussed they were viewed as either tomboys or sex objects (Campbell, 1984, 1991). In the 1970s, though, violent girls began receiving more attention because of the perceived increase in their offending and the involvement of more women in scholarship. Much of the work focused on explaining why so few girls and women participate in criminal activity compared to males, rather than on what motivates females toward crime and delinquency (Artz, 1998).

It was thought that differences in biology and socialization explain differences in the crime rate. Boys become aggressive and independent while girls become passive, dependent, and conventional (Artz, 1998). The increase in female violence was attributed to the perpetrators' renunciation of femininity and the adoption of masculine characteristics and values. The women's movement, which fostered female assertiveness and was said to encourage young women to adopt certain "male behaviors" (drinking, stealing, and fighting), was also blamed (Adler, 1975).

Subsequent research, including data showing that the increase in female crime was really not as significant as thought, discredited much of this research. Further, scholars and youth workers began to call for more nuanced approaches to understanding girls' aggression and violence which would consider how social class, race, ethnicity, and culture interact to create variations in the way young women experience and make use of violence (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998).

Risk Factors for Girls' Violence and Aggression

There have been few in-depth studies exploring the pathways to violence for girls. The handful of studies that do exist, however, yield important findings. Several risk factors that appear to foster young women's delinquent and violent acts have been isolated: physical and sexual victimization, negative attitudes toward school, lack of academic success, perceived lack of opportunities, a great deal of social activity, low self-esteem, and traditional beliefs about women's roles. Specifically, for example, the girls in Chesney-Lind and Koroki's study (1985) of female delinquent girls of racially mixed backgrounds in Hawaii all reported severe family problems: poverty, divorce, parental death, abandonment, alcoholism, and frequent experiences of abuse.

Abuse and Victimization

The relationship of physical and sexual abuse to women's criminal activity and violence can be seen clearly in studies on the backgrounds of incarcerated women and girls. Compared to their male counterparts, women jailed for crimes are much more likely to report previous sexual or physical abuse. In one study, almost one-half of the incarcerated women surveyed on their backgrounds reported that they had been abused previously while 12 percent of their male counterparts reported they had been.

Delinquent girls have also reported very high rates of physical and sexual abuse, ranging from approximately 40-70 percent in various studies (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). For example, participants in a Canadian study on white working-class violent girls (Artz, 1998) revealed frequent experiences of sexual and/or physical abuse in the home, with most describing violent homes characterized by dominant, abusive, and often alcoholic fathers and/or brothers, and mothers who made a tremendous effort to minimize tensions and victimization. The young women, in attempting to cope with the violence and silence, learned that power and control in the family resided in physical force. The message that survival means dominating the weaker members of the group guided them in their relationships outside the home as well.

In fact, Artz (1998) argues that girls' violence against other girls is grounded in the idea of "horizontal" violence. This means that members of oppressed or powerless groups (such as the girls in homes with dominating and abusive men) view similarly situated girls through their oppressor's eyes and mirror the oppressor's behaviors. Thus, in hoping to gain some measure of power, they beat up other girls. While the aggressor may feel powerful momentarily, the feeling is short-lived as it does little to change her status; rather, it perpetuates a cycle of retaliation. As Artz found, violent girls reported higher rates of victimization in the form of sexual abuse, physical abuse, and attacks by a group of peers than nonviolent girls.

School Failure

School failure has been shown to increase the risk that young people will turn to violence and delinquency, although poor school performance appears to have a stronger effect on girls than boys (Rankin, 1980). For example, in one study on the delinquency of African American youth, girls who reported more involvement in delinquency and violence were more likely to say they were not satisfied with their school experience, whereas for boys, "poor family relationships" rather than school experience seemed to predict involvement in delinquency (Farnworth, 1984). And while high grades and positive self-esteem seem to depress girls' involvement in violence and delinquency, boys' high grades raise their self-esteem, creating favorable orientations to risk-taking and thus greater delinquency (Heimer, 1995).

Additional Risk Factors

Many girls with extremely troubled school and social lives nevertheless held high aspirations of graduating from high school and going to college. However, unable to gain status through white middle-class means (i.e., schooling, careers, etc.) because of their families' low income, they sought recognition through adoption of a "bad girl" image. These girls also expressed very traditional gender role expectations for the future: a desire to marry and primarily be supported by a man, to have a large family, and to work in a stereotypically female job. They believed that men should be strong and assertive and women passive and nonviolent. Chesney-Lind and Shelden suggest that traditional beliefs and aspirations influence young women's relationships with romantic partners and serve to hold them in abusive relationships, raising their risk of involvement in delinquent and violent acts.

Moreover, the sexual abuse of girls plays a role in their low sense of self-worth and also contributes to their negative views of other females. In fact, Artz hypothesizes that a major factor in girls' aggression toward other girls is an internalized belief in women's inferiority that allows violent girls to rationalize such violence. She urges that much more research be conducted on how violent girls interpret and make sense of their own violence.

In a study of young African American and Latina women who were incarcerated for serious offenses in California, Bottcher (1986) identified three aspects of their lives that propelled them toward violence: leaving home or being kicked out and considerable free time without adult supervision; frequent experiences with physical and sexual abuse; and an inadvertent drift into violence and crime as their lives began to fall apart. Most of the young women indicated that they felt alienated from family and peers and suffered from low self-esteem. Artz's study of violent girls (who were not involved in the criminal justice system) also provided detailed accounts of troubled families, experiences with abuse, internalized notions of women's low social status, and poor performance and problems with discipline in school.

Gang Involvement

Female gangs make up a relatively small percentage of gangs nationwide. One estimate puts the number of female gang members at 7,200, or only 4 percent of youth identified as gang members (Chesney-Lind, Shelden, & Joe, 1996). Moore (1996), however, who studied gangs in Los Angeles, estimated that girls accounted for one-third of the youth in gangs.

There are a number of excellent accounts of gang girls and their lives and experiences in gangs. The best known perhaps is by Ann Campbell (1984, 1991) whose pathbreaking book, *Girls in the Gang*, explored the lives of African American and Latina female gang members in New York City. She documented the acute hardships faced by these low-income women, such as turbulent family lives, poverty, abuse, lack of education, and the everyday difficulties they faced as poor young women of color. For many of the young women, joining a gang served a social function: gangs provided a place where they belonged, and were accepted and protected. Moreover, they participated in violence because it was an expected means of survival and a way to prove themselves capable of fighting and to establish their reputation. Having a reputation provided protection for themselves and their female friends, and gave them a sense of worth and power. Gang girls also participated in violence to settle arguments over boys.

Gang participation provides girls with skills to survive in their harsh communities and at the same time allows them to escape temporarily a dismal future (Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995). According to Campbell (1984, 1991), joining a gang is an adaptive solution to difficult life circumstances, such as a bleak occupational future because of a lack of education and marketable skills, male subordination in the home, the sole responsibility for children, social isolation in the home, and the social and economic marginalization resulting from living in poor communities and the threat of victimization from crime.

Program Development to Address the Needs of Violent Girls

Programs serving young violent women effectively must take into account girls' status in a gendered society. While delinquent and violent girls share with their male counterparts many of the same problems, girls' problems are often a result of their status as females (such as sexual abuse, male violence, oppression by family members, occupational inequality, and early motherhood). As such, they require different program approaches from boys. Unfortunately, the record for funding girl-focused programs or those with components which address delinquent girls' unique needs has not been good. In 1975, for example, only $1.00 of every $4.00 donated by corporations was spent on girls' programming (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). Recently, a review of youth program evaluations showed that only 2.3 percent of delinquency programs served girls only.

An evaluation of the few existing programs effective with at-risk young women suggests that they have three common elements that combine in a culturally-sensitive approach to support girls in all facets of their lives (Chesney-Lind & Shelden, 1998). While counseling can be an effective component, it must be included in a complete program addressing the multiple needs of delinquent and at-risk young women, covering sensitively such areas as sexual abuse and violence in teen relationships. Programs also need to include educational and occupational support and skill-building. They also must respond to the many needs of young women no longer able to live with their families. Finally, girls need access to caring adults, involvement in organized community activities, and other protective environments to help them mature into healthy and productive women.

Girls Incorporated (1996) has recently published a review of promising programs that target delinquent girls and girls at risk of getting into trouble. Common to most of them is an emphasis on addressing the needs of young women in all spheres of their lives: family, educational, occupational, and health. Examples of effective programs include many of the Girls Incorporated programs that are sponsored nationally, such as Friendly PEERsuasion, which addresses issues such as helping girls to avoid substance abuse; Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy, which teaches girls prevention strategies including better parent-daughter communication and skill-building in postponing sexual activity, and provides health care; Operation SMART, aimed at enhancing skills in science and technology; and FUTURE (Females Unifying Teens to Undertake Responsible Education), which provides peer support to young troubled women in such areas as substance abuse, sexual and physical abuse, and avoiding gang involvement.

There are also notable local programs targeting young women sponsored by Girls Incorporated. For example, PACE (Practical, Academic, Cultural, Educational) in Florida, cited by the U.S. Department of Justice as a model program, offers comprehensive services to at-risk girls 12 to 18 years old, including life management skills, counseling, community service, educational programs, and job placement services. A unique program in Minneapolis which targets young Hmong women focuses on living in two cultures and teaches educational and vocational skill-building and provides support. This program has been par-

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ticularly effective in deterring young women from gang involvement, and is highly visible and accessible to girls in the community.

Finally, because the issue of male violence and aggression against young women cannot be ignored in the understanding of female delinquency and violence, separate programs need to be developed for aggressive and violent men and boys. This would minimize the risk of female victimization and, in turn, reduce the risk of girls' participation in violence.

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